

Articles

Dystopian Futures: Time-Travel and Millenarian Visions in the Poetry of Anna Barbauld and Charlotte Smith ✓

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Science-fiction and fantasy writing have always been, and continue to be, literary genres to which women writers are particularly attracted. In her study of women's science fiction, Sara Lefanu argues that among other things providing an appeal for women writers, is the fact that 'SF offers a language....for the interrogation of cultural order', an order in which they usually inhabit a marginalised position. [1] Within the various categories usually grouped together under the heading of science fiction, are two sub-genres which she identifies as being of particular interest: Utopias and Dystopias. In her discussion of feminist re-workings of these genres however, Lefanu concentrates on contemporary texts. In this essay, I want to examine the way in which these genres have previously been appropriated by women writers, by revisiting futuristic texts by two female poets of the Romantic period.

The two poems that I am going to focus on, Charlotte Smith's 'Beachy Head' and Anna Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, both use the fantastic device of time-travel to provide a vision of the ruins of British and European civilisation, and in my analysis of these texts I will be drawing on the theories of fantasy writing put forward by Rosemary Jackson in her critical study, *Fantasy: A Literature of Subversion*. Jackson points out that 'a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context' and consequently, 'though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that



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very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it'. [2] The dystopian visions of Smith and Barbauld are linked by a number of key features, which suggest that they are products of shared historical moment. In particular, both women tap into what might be termed the millenarian anxiety at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This kind of anxiety is not in itself wholly confined to this particular *fin-de-siècle*, as Malcolm Bradbury observes:

the turning of a century has a strongly chiliastic effect; it helps distil men's millenarian disposition to think about crisis, to reflect on history as revolution or cycle, to consider, as so many *fin-de-siècle* and *aube-de-siècle*, minds did consider, the question of endings and beginnings, the going and coming of the world. [3]

The turn of a century is often marked by literature which evokes this sense of crisis and uncertainty, but the *fin-de-siècle* which occurs in the middle of the Romantic period, is unusual in that it coincides with a set of cataclysmic political events, which seemed to make the sense of crisis more real and imminent. The French Revolution was widely interpreted as one of the first signs of the end of the age as prophesied in Revelation, and was thus figured in terms of the biblical apocalypse. Barbauld's lifelong friend Joseph Priestley, delivered a farewell sermon in Hackney on 28 February 1794, in which he reminds the congregation that the 'language of prophecy' tells us that 'great calamities, such as the world has never yet experienced, will precede that happy state of things, in which "the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ"'. He claims that it 'appears to me highly probable....that the present disturbances in Europe are the beginning of those very calamitous times'. [4] Coleridge, taking Priestley's lead also described the Revolution in terms of the biblical apocalypse, writing in his Unitarian poem 'Religious Musings' that 'the day of retribution is nigh:/The Lamb of God hath opened the fifth seal', and in a direct allusion to the conflict in France, warns that 'Even now the storm begins'. [5]

Even after the century had turned this apocalyptic mood continued, and the literary marketplace was flooded by a deluge of visionary writing. Stuart Curran, in his discussion of this trend in *Poetic Forms and British Romanticism*, argues that in the early years of the nineteenth century 'the visionary mode' had become so popular, that it was 'threatening to become a tired cliché'. [6] He cites Joseph Cottle, who, writing in 1815 stated that 'all prophecies and anticipations of futurity, in an heroic poem, are defects of considerable magnitude' (Curran, p. 248). Many of the poems which appeared at this time however, tended to adopt a more secular apocalyptic tone than those written in the 1790s, and the most popular strategy deployed in these texts was a turning to the 'legendary past' in the face of the crisis in the present, with the agenda of validating and re-affirming Britain's power in the future (Curran, p. 161). I want to suggest however, that alongside the male-authored visionary epics which Curran discusses in some detail, we can trace an alternative futurist agenda in the poetry of women writers of the period. In the early years of the nineteenth century both Charlotte Smith and Anna Barbauld, adopt the genre of visionary writing in subversive ways. Rather than imagining a utopian future which heralds a return to Britain's legendary past, they instead use the narrative of past events, to imagine a logically projected future, which appears not as utopian but dystopian

I want to complicate this idea however, by suggesting that while the texts do function in an overtly dystopian way, they can be read as semi-utopian, that is as wish-fulfilments, for the female authors themselves, and here it may be useful to draw on Jackson's argument that alongside a socio-political reading of fantasy we must also place a psychoanalytic one, since fantasy writing is primarily about the exploration of unconscious desire (Jackson, p. 6). In the case of Smith and Barbauld, while their visions of the ruins of Britain and the decay of civilisation may appear dystopian, and were certainly read as 'gloomy' and 'desponding' by the male critics of the day, the way in which they function for the women poets is more ambiguous. [7] One recent critic has defined utopian texts as 'a textual construction of a society more perfect than the reader's own', and so in a sense, these imaginative projections of a future in which British imperial and patriarchal power lies in ruins, could be seen to function in a utopian way for Barbauld and Smith. [8] These poems then represent a complex vision that is simultaneously, both overtly dystopian and secretly utopian.

Charlotte Smith's lengthy poem 'Beachy Head' was published posthumously in 1806, and is a particularly apposite site for a discussion of ends and beginnings, since this textually marks the close of Smith's poetic career, being left unfinished at her death on October 28 1806 at the age of fifty-seven. The poem itself moreover lacks a definitive 'end', remaining intriguingly and curiously open, despite the visions of closure contained within it. It is a text peculiarly obsessed with time and with the temporal, which it explores on a number of levels, through personal memory, national history and geologic time. There are two key strategies in the poem which allow Smith to link the past and present; the first is historical analogy and the second is time-travel. It is the second of these two strategies with which I am concerned here, and I want to show how Smith's device of sweeping backwards and forwards through time, grants her imaginative empowerment and allows her to envisage social revolution and the future decay of oppressive power.

The setting at the opening of the poem is significant; her vantage point is the 'stupendous summit' of Beachy Head, the 533 ft chalk promontory on the coast of Sussex, close to Smith's childhood home, and site of a disastrous battle for the English against the French in 1690. [9] The spot rears up over the channel and grants Smith a supremely omniscient perspective from which she can view the effects of geologic time and the symbolic division of nations. It is from this position that Smith conjures up her time-travelling device, 'Fancy' (4). Fancy is a crucial and transgressive figure in Smith's poetry; as a personification of her imaginative faculties it is both feminised and empowered, and can 'go forth' allowing Smith to 'recline' in a more acceptably feminine position. Fancy can moreover defy the Newtonian laws of time and space, and move around freely, not only in the physical landscape but also within the past, giving us a privileged access to history and granting Smith a tremendous vista of vision:

Contemplation here,
High on her throne of rock, aloof may sit,
And bid recalling Memory unfold
Her scroll voluminous[.]



Like the visionary epics produced by her male contemporaries then, Smith takes us on an imaginative journey into Britain's historical past, but unlike the other epics of the period, hers is not simply a celebration of a nationalistic past, rather she revisits the long-standing antipathy between Britain and France and offers a much more ambiguous reading of Britain's history. She begins by addressing the cultural and political divide between the two countries, by travelling back through geologic time and viewing the symbolic moment when the land mass was fractured, physically dividing Britain from Europe:

....the strange and awful hour
Of vast concussion; when the Omnipotent
Stretch'd forth his arm, and rent the solid hills,
Bidding the impetuous main flood rush between
The rifted shores, and from the continent
Eternally divided this green isle.

5

From this key moment, Smith takes us on a historical journey through French/English hostilities, a journey which has been usefully mapped by Matthew Bray in his essay 'Removing the Anglo-Saxon Yoke: The Francocentric Vision of Charlotte Smith's later Works'. In this essay he argues that Smith offers an alternative account of history to those put forward in the patriotic visionary epics of these years. He suggests that '[f]rom 1798 until her death in 1806, [Smith] articulated an increasingly seditious vision of England's historical and political ties to France, a vision that went against the patriotic Anglo-Saxonism that consumed Britain during the early years of the war'. ^[10] Bray sees 'Beachy Head' as the 'logical conclusion' of her 'subversive historiography', in which she reverses the popular emphasis on Anglo-Saxon history by depicting this as a history of Norman Conquests and successes (Bray, p. 156). As a parallel to this subversive re-telling of history, achieved through her strategy of time-travel, I want to suggest that Smith also projects an alternative vision of the future.

As well as describing English/French hostilities in the poem, Smith also catalogues the numerous warriors who have invaded British shores—the 'proud martial race/Of Scandinavia' (126) and the Romans, 'the mail'd legions, under Claudius' (410)—and the poem sets up an direct link between these invaders and Britain herself, by revealing a shared colonial agenda. At one point she offers an overt critique of Britain's colonialism and imperial acquisitiveness, writing scathingly of Britain's empire and its economic base, which deploys slavery to plunder Asia for its hidden jewels:

There the Earth hides within her glowing breast
The beamy adamant, and the round pearl
Enchased in rugged covering; which the slave,
With perilous and breathless toil, tears off
From the rough sea-rock, deep beneath the waves.
These are the toys of Nature; and her sport
Of little estimate in Reason's eye:
And they who reason, with abhorrence see

Man, for such gaudes and baubles, violate
The sacred freedom of his fellow man[.]

50

Later in the poem she describes the enterprise of the Roman and Viking invaders in terms of a similar brutality and acquisitiveness, subtly linking their colonial violence with Britain's own:

The pirate Dane, who from his circular camp
Bore in destructive robbery, fire and sword
Down thro' the vale[.]

426

Although Smith does not overtly predict Britain's downfall in the poem, she does describe the fate of these earlier colonisers, and consequently in her descriptions of time effacing their conquests, there is an implied message to Britain that she too, in time, will be wiped away:

Hither, Ambition come!
Come and behold the nothingness of all
For which you carry thro' the oppressed Earth,
War, and its train of horrors—see where tread
The innumerable hoofs of flocks above the works
By which the warrior sought to register
His glory, and immortalize his name[.]

419

The link which is made in the poem between British and Roman/Viking colonial agendas, means that the carefully abstracted 'Ambition', can be read as a coded term for Britain here, with her arrogant imperialism, acquisitiveness and her colossal Empire. Smith uses the logic of history and the device of time travel to figure the way in which time has effaced the power of these earlier civilisations, and through this offers a covert vision of Britain's fate:

All, with the lapse of Time, have passed away,
Even as the clouds, with dark and dragon shapes,
Or like vast promontories crown'd with towers,
Cast their broad shadows on the downs: then sail
Far to the northward, and their transient gloom
Is soon forgotten.

434

This potent and fantastical image, achieved through the imaginative speeding up of time, allows us to witness the way that buildings rise and fall with the effervescence and transitoriness of clouds. This focus on the dissolution of architectural symbols of power is a key feature of Smith's futuristic visions, and the images of decaying and eroding buildings which appear in this and other late poems, carry a coded political commentary. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke's Conservative defence of the *ancien regime* and his denunciation of the Revolution, he uses an image of a castle through which to figure the state. He argues that the French people, instead of engaging in revolution, should have 'repaired' the 'walls' and 'built on' the old foundations of the 'noble and venerable castle which was the French political state. [11] This metaphor was picked up on by several radical writers of the period, including Smith. In an essay on her novels entitled, 'Charlotte Smith's Emblematic Castles', Loraine Fletcher argues that Smith's 'castles and manors' function as 'images of the state' throughout the radical years of the 1790s, and that she repeatedly satirises this metaphor in her novels by depicting ancient mansions with rotting, rat infested wainscoting and castles with 'birds nesting' in the 'turrets'. [12]

In the imagery scattered through the collection in which 'Beachy Head' appears, we find that nature has now taken over these symbols of established power almost completely. These are now no longer figured as decaying and animal infested, but lying in fragments, and the territory on which they stood is reclaimed by nature, a trope which suggests that she has now given up all hope of the rotting and corrupt states of Europe being repaired. Instead the relics of these once impressive buildings are inhabited by labourers and hermits. In 'Beachy Head' she describes the 'ruin'd battlements' of a 'dismantled fortress' as now the 'humbler homestead' (502) of a 'tiller of the soil' (500) and in another 'castellated mansion' (506), 'In rude disorder fallen (508), a lonely 'stranger' (507) sets up home, and here, 'Among the ruins' (510) and the 'fragments grey of towers and buttresses..../often he would muse' (509). This imagery presents us with an almost post-apocalyptic world, in which the remaining human inhabitants are forced to return to pre-civilised existence and inhabit the wrecked shells of once impressive buildings, or even more primeval dwellings; a second hermit in the poem lives in a 'cavern' (673), a 'flint-surrounded home' (686) in the rocks of Beachy Head. These images of the lone inhabitants of ruined castles or sea caves might suggest Rousseauistic critique of the corrupting powers of civilisation and progress. Here civilisation is not only critiqued but imaginatively rejected, as Smith figures a return to a more primitive kind of existence.

The fact that both of these internal émigrés are paralleled with Smith herself within the text, also suggests that her vision of the decay of social order, in favour of a life which allows for a closer commune with nature, functions in a utopian way. The first, the 'stranger' who inhabits the ruined castle, recalls Smith's own miserable marriage and her subsequent turning to poetry; he has been 'cross'd in love' (521) and writes verses to ease his suffering, fragments of which he leaves behind him when he disappears. The second, like Smith has been 'long disgusted with the world' (674); he is both 'outraged..../By human crimes' (689) and yet 'still acutely fe[els]/For human misery' (690). He also shares Smith's obsession with the sea. [13] Both of these men, and the gender is significant, function as wish-fulfilments for Smith in their realisation of alternative life-styles outside the civilised world. In *The Emigrants*, her thinly disguised autobiographical persona expresses the desire to 'abjure society' and hide herself in 'some lone Cottage, deep embower'd/In the green woods' (43), but with several children and grandchildren reliant on her for support, for Smith such escapism was never a realistic option. She displaces her desires onto two male hermits who are free to realise this kind of retreat into nature. Both men also enact a very literal return to

nature as they are, in the course of the poem absorbed back into its wild zones; the first in 'silence, gliding like a ghost/....vanish'd!' (571) and was 'Lost among the deepening gloom' (572) of the forest, and the second drowns in the 'angry flood' (720) of the sea.

Nature clearly figures in a central way in Smith's futuristic visions. Running parallel with the dissolution of architectural buildings is a re-instatement of nature's power. The symbols of civilisation and emblems of power: castles, fortresses and abbeys, are shown to decay and fall into ruin, finally becoming nothing more than mere undulations on the landscape as nature once again takes over. A shepherd sits upon a 'turfy knoll' (400), unaware that:

....deep beneath
Rest the remains of men, of whom is left
No traces in the records of mankind[.]

401

In 'Saint Monica', another of Smith's late poems, she again uses a movement through the 'lapse of years' (19) to figure the decay of an architectural symbol of power, and to illustrate the way in which nature functions as a transgressive obliterating force. The abbey of St. Monica is described as a ruin, a 'dismantled site' (1), and despite the fashion for ruined abbeys and castles in the literature of the period, the emphasis here is not on the ruin in terms of its melancholic or Gothic propensities, but of the way in which nature has begun to reclaim the territory. The 'falling archway' is 'overgrown/With briars' (10), 'half the falling cloisters are conceal'd/By ash and elder' (22) and 'matted tods' of ivy bind 'the arch and buttress' (50). Time throws his 'oblivious pall' (86) over individual men and their works, and through a collusion with nature comes to represent a potent fantastical force:

From the mapped lichen, to the plumed weed,
From thready mosses to the veined flower,
The silent, slow, but ever active power
Of Vegetative Life, that o'er Decay
Weaves her green mantle[.]

87

Nature, triffid-like, begins to take over as the symbols of patriarchal power are quietly obliterated, but for Smith herself this is not a dystopian vision, and out of the image she constructs a new philosophy and hope:

Oh Nature! ever lovely, ever new,
....while to dark Forgetfulness they go,
Man, and the works of man; immortal Youth,
Unfading Beauty, and eternal Truth,
Your heaven-indited volume will display,



While Art's elaborate monuments decay,
Even as these shatter'd aisles, deserted Monica!

94

While patriarchal European power is imaginatively effaced through time, nature is granted a durability, and in these last poems Smith seems to want to link women with a transgressive botanised nature. This alternative construction of nature allows her to side-step the more negative links between women and a silent, abstracted nature, which are pervasive in Romantic literature, replacing a problematically mythologised 'Mother Nature' with a more potent feminised Nature, which she figures elsewhere as Flora, the Goddess of Botany. [14]

In Smith's final poems there is another futuristic vision, and that is in her realisation that her own verses have the capacity to travel through time, allowing her to speak from beyond the grave to future ages. In 'To my Lyre'—which as her sister notes, 'appears, from the feebleness of the handwriting, to have been composed a very short time before her death'—Smith moves towards the idea that her poetry might provide a way out of the oppressive socio-political framework, from which she herself could not escape:

And as the time ere long must come
When I lie silent in the tomb,
Thou wilt preserve these mournful pages;
For gentle minds will love my verse,
And Pity shall my strains rehearse,
And tell my name to distant ages. [15]

43

In a sense the real time-travellers here are the poems themselves. Contained and silenced in the tomb, Smith imagines a vicarious freedom granted her through her poetry. In her vision of the ruin of patriarchal power and the accompanying return to a pre-civilised state, Smith also looks for a space in which to as her own work, which would transcend the politics of her own moment.

Anna Barbauld's last major poetic work, *Eighteen-Hundred and Eleven*, shares a number of crucial features with Smith's poem 'Beachy Head', in particular she adopts the same technique of personifying Fancy as a time-traveller who 'wanders....down the lapse of years'. [16] Unlike Smith's futuristic visions however, Barbauld's are uncoded, and as a consequence, were received with now infamous hostility by the literary journals of the day. The aspect of the poem which the reviewers latch onto and attack, is precisely that which could be categorised generically as science-fiction, the section in which she depicts Britain at some future moment lying in a state of ruins. Barbauld had frequently deployed prophecy in her poems published in the radical years of the 1790s, as a strategy by which she could imagine her way out of a political impasse, but she had never before called on this technique to depict such a fully imagined future. [17] The *Anti-Jacobin's* main line of critique is specifically this futuristic aspect of the text, concluding acerbically that 'had we not a sovereign contempt for the prophetic powers of Mrs. Barbauld....we should

be too much depressed in heart and spirit, to make a single comment on her desponding poem' (*Anti-Jacobin Review*, p. 209). In *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* futuristic imaginings are not used merely as a strategy of escape, but also to offer a damning critique of British politics. To depict so vividly and with such authority, a vision of a Britain in ruins, could only be interpreted as threatening to a male establishment almost brought to its knees, by the ambitious international policies of the French Republic's successors.

It is perhaps not unexpected then that the voice of the Tory establishment should react with hostility to the poem and the dark vision contained within it. What is surprising however, is that even some of Barbauld's closest friends reacted negatively towards the text. Henry Crabbe Robinson, a close confidante of Barbauld's and a fellow-Unitarian, also expressed unease at the futuristic visions it contains:

I certainly wish she had not written it....[f]or the tone and spirit of it are certainly very bad. She does not content herself with expressing her fears lest England should perish in the present struggle; she speaks with the confidence of a prophet of the fall of her country as if she had seen in a vision the very process of this ruin...The poem is principally offensive from the want of philosophic spirit, and from a sort of arrogant determining of the fate of nations without any authentication by sagacious remark of the right even to guess at the probable issue....there is a narrowness of idea which will expose her to the charge of presumption in assuming the character of a philosophic poet or that of a prophetic 'Elegyist'. [18]

The terms of Crabbe Robinson's criticism here are revealing. He critiques firstly the vivid and detailed way in which Barbauld actually depicts the future, 'as if she had seen in a vision the process of its ruin', and indeed what is so powerful about this poem is the way in which she does not merely hint at the decline of the British Empire, but takes you on an imaginative tour of the country's wreckage. Secondly, he condemns her 'arrogan[ce]' and 'confidence' in taking up the genre of visionary poetics; as 'high' genre: poetry, philosophy and prophecy were reserved for male writers. Finally, I would suggest that these lines are imbued with the same anxiety which we find in the *Anti-Jacobin*, at the negativity of her future predictions. He describes her as 'presumptio[us]' in becoming a 'prophetic "Elegyist"', in other words, in predicting her country's future in such mournful, or dystopian terms.

It is perhaps significant that among the almost universal criticism of the poem by the contemporary journals and by Barbauld's own friends, there is one much more positive reading. The reviewer in the *New British Lady's Magazine* writes that:

Her theme is serious; and some may think her strains too melancholy, and her visions of her country's future fate too gloomy. Be they so. Too much of excitement to the slaughter of our species, by flattering views of false glory, has England now received, to leave in the minds, even of the most martial among us, any apprehension of a counter-spirit of peace, reason, and religion. [19]

Although explicitly gendered terms are not used, these lines, placed as they are in a 'Lady's Magazine' and describing the poem's inclusion in a 'Lady's Cabinet of Literature', suggest a specifically female reaction to a masculine agenda of colonial exploitation and military aggression. It also hints at a possible alternative reading of Barbauld's 'dystopian vision', which though described as 'gloomy', is nevertheless validated, and seen as a more positive 'counter' vision to the nationalist literature of the period.

What I want to address in my reading of the poem is this ambiguity in the text which the *NBLM* highlights; the fact that it is dystopian—or 'gloomy'—in its visions of the future, and yet can still be seen as utopian for some readers, in that its future predictions represent a strong counter-narrative to the imperialistic, militaristic, and nationalistic message running through the male-authored visionary literature of the period. This counter-narrative may be defined as female in that it is written by a woman and acknowledged by women to be a shared desire. The *NBLM* made its own prophecy upon *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, that it was a poem which 'not Fashion merely, but Fame herself, shall own' (p. 319). With our literary canons being devised by a line of critics descending from the contemporary male reviewers, this was unlikely, and has indeed until recently proved unfounded. However, with the recent scholarly edition of Barbauld's works and one of the latest anthologies of Romantic women's poetry including the first complete and unabridged versions of the poem to be published in Britain for more than a century, it is possible that we are on the threshold of this prophecy being realised. [20]

The title of Barbauld's most important work is in itself revealing. Although the poem looks to the future, it is termed *Eighteen-Hundred and Eleven*, the year in which it was written, and this should signal to us the extent to which it helps to set up a tradition of science-fiction writing, which uses an imagined future to comment on the present. Indeed the poem opens with a bitter comment on the present climate of Europe, which had been engaged in bloody conflict for more than two decades: 'Still the loud death-drum, thundering from afar,/O'er the vext nations pours the storm of war'(1). In the first section of the poem (ll. 1-38) she describes the horrors of the Napoleonic conflicts, an 'overwhelming force/Bear[ing] down ea[st] fort of freedom in its course' (7), but goes on in the second section (ll. 39-112) to argue that Britain herself is not exempt from blame for the current political situation. It is at this point in the poem, as she surveys Britain's guilt, that a futuristic tone begins to enter the verse:

And think'st thou, Britain, still to sit at ease,
An island Queen amidst thy subject seas,
....
To sport in wars, while danger keeps aloof,
Thy grassy turf unbruised by hostile hoof?
So sing the flatterers; but, Britain, know,
Thou who has shared the guilt must share the woe.

Nature imagery is evoked to imagine the 'Ruin' which will descend on Britain, and through the contemporary gendering of nature feminine, this could perhaps be read as a feminine vengeance. It is certainly apocalyptic, as 'Ruin' comes like 'an earthquake shock' (49). However Britain's fall, Barbauld

suggests, is not a fulfilment of biblical prophecy, but rather a consequence of the corruption of an economic base that is built upon 'baseless wealth' which 'dissolves in air away' (53), and in her later vision of London in ruins, she comments that 'the state which commerce brings' is that 'Merchants/Send forth their mandates to dependent kings' (163), in an early capitalist critique.

The third section of the poem was that of most interest to contemporary critics and is of most relevance here. It represents, as Crabbe Robinson suggests, a sustained attempt to actually picture and describe a dystopian future for Britain 'as if she had seen it in a vision' (Crabbe Robinson, p. 64). This future moment is envisioned through the power of 'Fancy' (113), which as in Smith's poem, functions as a strategy of movement that allows the poet to escape from the present and to travel freely in time. 'Fancy' is described as 'wander[ing]....down the lapse of years'/Shedding o'er imaged woes untimely tears' (113), a figuring which suggests that Barbauld tried to preclude reviewers' criticisms, by replacing the omniscient Old Testament prophetic model with a more acceptable feminised version. Despite this feminisation of the prophetic persona, Barbauld's vision of the future is omniscient and apocalyptic, as she looks to an apparently dystopian moment to be, when Britain lies in ruins like Rome and Greece, and is visited by American tourists. In formulating this vision Barbauld, like Smith, responds to the tide of visionary and generally nationalistic epics which, as Curran notes, swept through the early years of the nineteenth century, and which in their turn were strongly influenced by Volney's 1789 *Ruins of Empire*. Barbauld rewrites key male poetic visions of Britain's future, however, including earlier ones by Pope and Thomson as well as those put forward by her immediate contemporaries. Her poem seems to be particularly engaged with a re-working of Thomson's earlier poem, *Liberty* (1733-4), in which the Goddess of Liberty attended by arts and science is figured as moving from Italy and Greece to Britain, which 'shines supreme,/The land of light' (IV, 523). [21] Barbauld takes the logic of Thomson's argument one stage further to a time when that light has moved on again, and Britain itself lies in darkness and in ruins. The dystopian nature of Barbauld's vision cannot simply be attributed to her often radical political opinions however, since it also challenges the futuristic vision of Britain put forward by the young Percy Bysshe Shelley in his revolutionary epic *Queen Mab* (1813), a poem which he began work on in 1811 and which responds to the same political moment as Barbauld's text. A similar omniscience of vision is adopted by both poets as they survey the past, examine the tyrannies of the present and look to the future. Shelley's poem however, although revolutionary rather than patriotic, shares with Thomson and the other male writers of visionary epics, a vision of Britain's future which is Utopian and optimistic, in which 'Through the wide rent in Time's eternal veil/Hope was seen beaming' (VIII, 12). [22] In contrast, Barbauld's time-travelling figure of Fancy, awaits the revelation of the future nervously, 'as hopes—as fears prevail,/She longs, or dreads, to lift the awful veil' (115). Barbauld keeps her audience waiting in suspense for the revelation of Britain's future, but after surveying the pattern of empires and the corruption of Britain's economic basis, she refuses to shy away from the logic of this paradigm, and figures Britain not in terms of nationalistic glory or revolutionary idealism, but in ruins.

In the reviews of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* it is clear that it was this third section of the poem which caused the most unease and which profoundly disturbed contemporary critics. It is a vivid evocation of a seemingly post-apocalyptic world, which is skeletal and 'wasted' (245), and as in Smith's poem there is a return to a pre-civilised existence, as Britain returns to a state of 'Gothic night' (121) and barbarity. In her discussion of Utopian fiction, Anne Cranny Francis points out that an 'overdetermination' of 'geographical

location' is crucial in constructing an 'activist reading position' for the text (Cranny Francis, p. 114). In other words, to render a utopia— or by extension a dystopia—politically effective, it is essential that the writer makes clear and direct references to actual places, so that the reader can infer a message in the contrast between then and now. She cites William Morris's *News from Nowhere* as a classic example of a nineteenth century Utopian activist text, in which he 'takes his reader on a suburb by suburb cart-ride through twenty-first century London, past well-known landmarks such as the Houses of Parliament and the Stock Exchange, and then on a trip up the Thames into Oxfordshire' (*ibid*). In Barbauld's poem, written more than half-a-century earlier, she also takes us on a detailed tour of major British landmarks, and this focus on geographical location in the poem points to Barbauld's underlying political intentions. These can also be detected in the more overt political commentary running through the poem; she forces us to consider Britain's own 'guilt' (46), and thus her lying in ruins is all the more bitter: 'Time' has torn 'the garland from her brow' (125).

Barbauld's futuristic vision annoyed the Tory reviewers on two counts. Not only is it a vision of Britain in ruins, but adding insult to injury, the tour around the country's wreckage is undertaken by a New World tourist 'From the Blue Mountains, or Ontario's lake' (130). We follow this figure on his visits to various geographical locations, where once British 'statesmen, sages, poets, heroes trod' (132). He moves from the banks of the Isis, northwards up the country following its major rivers to the classic Romantic site, the Lake District, where he visits 'stern Skiddaw' and the waterall at 'Lodore' (154). It is in London with her 'faded glories' (158) that he lingers however, and it is here that Barbauld's future vision is most overtly dystopian, and the contrast between present and future most striking. Like Carthage and other once-mighty cities, London is 'fallen' (211), and all that is left are fragmentary relics of an earlier might: 'the fractured arch, the ruined tower,/Those limbs disjointed of gigantic power' (253). The young tourist climbs 'broken stairs' (172) to a 'crumbling turret' (171), and from here is granted a panoramic view of London's desolation, and of the Thames which, 'choked no more with fleets' (175), 'Through reeds and sedge pursue[s] his idle way' (176).

Like Smith, Barbauld also uses this visionary poem to formulate a critique of Britain's colonial agendas and a clue as to why Britain has so fallen is contained within these images of the country's ruins. The tourist's 'eyes shall gaze' on 'spoils from every clime' (209), on 'Egyptian granites and the Etruscan vase' (210). These relics function not only as reminders of earlier civilisations gone before but as symbols of Britain's own corruption. They are mementoes of the imperialistic, acquisitive, and avaricious economic base upon which Britain has laid its foundations and because of which it is doomed to fall. These images of corruption lead us in to the final section of the poem (line 114 to the end), that which scans the decline and fall of empires and contains the prophecy for the next great empire of the world. It is this final part of the poem, and specifically Barbauld's strategy of using an imaginary personification—alternatively termed a 'Spirit' (215) and a 'Genius' (241)—which travels around the world bestowing a civilising influence, that caused the most confusion among Barbauld's contemporaries. The *Anti-Jacobin* commented sardonically that '[o]n this passage, we shall only remark, that if *obscurity be clearness*, Mrs. B. has been most happy in her delineation of the '*spirit*,'....As nearly as we can guess—for we cannot speak with certainty—this said *moody* and *viewless* spirit is *liberty*. (*Anti-Jacobin Review*, p. 208). As I have argued elsewhere, this figure seems to represent the Spirit of the Enlightenment, but what is of interest to me here is the fact that this 'Genius' turns his civilising influence away from Britain's shores onto those of the New World. [23] The

future nationalistic glory which in other poems of the period is projected onto Britain, is here displaced onto a geographically remote site. I want to suggest that this vision at the end of the poem, that 'Thy world, Columbus, shall be free' (334), again functions to destabilise the gap between dystopia and utopia. For the establishment journals of the day, this aspect of the poem was clearly read as dystopian. John Wilson Croker, the author of the most hostile of all the reviews on the poem, highlights the establishment alarm at a vision of 'England' which 'is undone....while America is to go on increasing and improving in arts, in arms, and even....in virtue'. [24] For Barbauld however, this vision is at least semi-Utopian. Since her close friend Joseph Priestley had escaped his persecutors by emigrating to America, the New World had taken on symbolic significance for her, and while she mourned Britain's inability to recognise Priestley's intrinsic worth, she nevertheless saw some hope in America's acceptance of him. Her prediction at the end of this poem is more accurate than those Tory reviewers would have liked to think; ironically it is American academics who are at the vanguard of sifting through British Romantic culture, questioning current models of Romanticism, and re-affirming Barbauld's status as a major literary figure.

Barbauld and Smith's re-visioning of the futuristic mode which dominated the poetical output in the early years of the nineteenth century, suggests a profound difference in the way in which science-fiction was deployed by male and female writers of the period. While many of their male contemporaries were busy trying to project Britain's past glory onto her future, these two women writers seem to claim, that a future which was logically a product of the past and present, could only be a dystopian one. Although there are examples of dystopian visions penned by male writers in the period, this was certainly not the dominant trend. One of the most obvious examples of a male-authored text which imagines a nightmare future, is Byron's 'Darkness', published in 1819. This is a dream vision of the end of the world, in which 'the icy earth/Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air' and, in a reversal of the biblical creation myth, the universe returns to chaos. [25] The crucial difference between this dystopian vision and those imagined by Barbauld and Smith, is that here it is not just civilisation which is destroyed, but nature itself, which turns to lifeless darkness. In the futuristic poems which I have explored here, it is not the end of the world which is imagined but rather the end of human civilisation. In Barbauld and Smith's imagined futures, nature continues as a life giving force, and it is merely the relics of mankind which must crumble into dust. In a reverse move to the neutron bomb which destroys life but leaves buildings standing, both Smith and Barbauld annihilate the buildings, while natural life goes on as before. This continuation of life while symbols of power are obliterated, although read as dystopian by their male contemporaries, is precisely that which suggests that for some readers and for the poets themselves, these visions can be seen in a more utopian light, as a fulfilment of desire. While Barbauld certainly regrets the failure of the Enlightenment, there is evidence of hidden desire in her depiction of the symbols of Britain's greatness lying in ruins, and this can be perceived in the way in which she figures the symbols of establishment power lying in a more ruinous condition than the relics of Dissenting history. This was something which the contemporary reviewers picked up on, and about which Croker waxes particularly satirical: 'Oxford and Cambridge in ruins! London a desert, and the Thames a sedgy brook! While Mr. Roscoe's barns and piggeries are in excellent repair and objects not only of curiosity but even reverence and enthusiasm' (Croker, pp. 311-2). [26] This telling incongruity in Barbauld's poem suggests that her future vision does function as wish-fulfilment, as a future in which establishment power is destroyed while symbols of the Dissenting Enlightenment are re-valued. Smith's vision, in an even more obvious way, functions as an imaginative realisation of her own desires, in which symbols of the patriarchal power which had blighted

her life, are trampled underfoot by roaming herds of sheep, and forgotten. The repeated and almost suicidal desire for oblivion which we find in her sonnets finds a more positive outlet in the fantastic timescapes of her late works, with a vision of the human self merging with an enduring and powerful nature.

In both of these poems written towards the end of their careers, Barbauld and Smith offer a radical comment on their own society through the strategy of time-travel. Realised through the feminised figure of Fancy, this device functions as an audacious act of female transgression, as the woman poet moves freely in time and geographical space, thus challenging nineteenth-century restrictions on the female body and mind. As an imaginative strategy time-travel grants the women tremendous empowerment, allowing them to transcend a restrictive socio-political framework, and look to a future in which Britain's empire lies in ruins and imperialistic patriarchal power in fragments. While both writers take Volney's *Ruins of Empire* to its logical conclusion, imagining the collapse of Britain's imperial power, there is perhaps a subtle difference in the extremity of their visions. Barbauld does try to project hope for a future civilisation onto the New World, albeit not so convincingly as she imagines Britain's decline; Smith, however, is unwilling or unable to imagine any perpetuation of social order, and replaces this with a vision of a return to a pre-civilised existence, with hermits and shepherds inhabiting sea-caves and the shells of the old symbols of power. Smith's imagined future, although not so fully realised as Barbauld's, must finally be seen as the most radical and anarchic of the two: a terrifying indication of the extent to which early nineteenth-century society had failed to answer the needs of so many of its citizens, especially Smith suggests, its women. Despite this crucial difference between their futuristic imaginings, it is perhaps the similarity of this shared vision of the ruins of power and empire which is most significant. Barbauld and Smith's mutual fascination in their later work with time travel and with an image of European civilisation in ruins, is indicative of both their political powerlessness in the society in which they lived, and their fundamental desire to transcend that socio-political framework.

Footnotes

- [1] Sarah Lefanu, *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (London: The Wom Press, 1988) p. 23.
- [2] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981) p. 3.
- [3] Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds), *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) p. 51.
- [4] Joseph Priestley, 'A Sermon Preached at the Gravel Pit Meeting in Hackney 1794', *A Farewell Sermon* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989) p. 2.
- [5] *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1907) p. 54.
- [6] Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 248.
- [7] *Anti-Jacobin Review*, 42 (1812): 209.
- [8] Anne Cranny Francis, *Feminist Fictions: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) p. 108.



[9] *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 217, l. 1; hereafter quoted in the text by page number.

[10] Matthew Bray, *Removing the Anglo-Saxon Yoke: The Francocentric Vision of Charlotte Smith's Later Works*, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 24:3 (1993): 155.

[11] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) p. 121.

[12] Loraine Fletcher, 'Charlotte Smith's Emblematic Castles', *Critical Survey*, 4:1 (1992): 7, 4.

[13] Sea imagery is a recurring feature of Smith's poems, but particularly dominates her sonnets, and can be read as a transgressive force which threatens to overwhelm and break down social hierarchies. See especially her Sonnet 44 'Written in the Church-Yard at Middleton in Sussex' and the accompanying poem 'Elegy' (Curran pp. 42, 80-3).

[14] In her poem 'Flora', Smith again evokes the power of Fancy, here to travel not through time, but into a fantastically envisioned microscopic world of plants. In this poem, Fancy is described as the 'Queen of ideal pleasure' (7), indicating the way in which this figure functions as a strategy for exploring Smith's own desires.

[15] [Catherine] Dorset, 'Charlotte Smith', in Walter Scott, *The Lives of the Novelists* (London: Dent, [n.d.]) p. 309.

[16] *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, eds. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994) p. 155, l. 113.

[17] See for example her poem 'Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq' on the debate regarding the abolition of the slave-trade. The poem is written after the Bill in parliament had been rejected, and ends with a projection onto a future moment in which 'History' (120) will mark 'the features of this motley age' (121) to tell 'how you strove, and that you strove in vain' (123). The same strategy of looking to a future moment is deployed in her poem 'To Dr. Priestley' which was written after the burning of his home during the Birmingham riots of 1791. In the poem Barbauld critiques the current reactionary political mood in which all spokespersons for liberty are punished, and she uses prophecy to express anger and to offer a way out of the present crisis; she terms the moment a 'passing age' (13) and looks to 'future periods':

....that distant day, -
If distant,—when thy name, to freedom's join'd,
Shall meet the thanks of a regenerate land.

Feedback

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[18] Henry Crabbe Robinson, *On Books and Their Writers*, ed. Edith J. Morley, 3 vols. (London: Dent, 1938) vol. I, pp. 63-4.

[19] *New British Lady's Magazine*, 2 (1815): 319.

[20] The full text of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is included in *Romantic Women Poets*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) pp. 10-18.

[21] *The Poetical Works of James Thomson* (London and Edinburgh: Nimmo, 1878).

[22] *The Poems of Shelley*, eds. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London and New York: Longman, 1989) p. 343, Canto 8, l. 12.

[23] See my article 'Gendering the Enlightenment: Conflicting Images of Progress in the Poetry of Anna Laetitia Barbauld', *Women's Writing*, 5:3 (Autumn 1998): 365-7.

[24] [John Wilson Croker], *The Quarterly Review*, 7 (June 1812): 310.

[25] *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (Glasgow: Grand Colosseum Warehouse, n.d.) p. 591, l. 4.

[26] William Roscoe was a fellow Dissenter and a radical philanthropist, he was also renowned for his experimental farming methods, which is what Barbauld picks up on in the poem when she writes that he, 'Led Ceres to the black and barren moor/Where Ceres never gained a wreath before' (149).

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